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CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF THE KAREN

The traditions of the Karen clearly indicate that they have not always lived in their present home. The most striking story is that of "Htaw Meh Pa," the mythical founder of the Karen race, who lived with his numerous family in some unknown land to the North, where their fields were ravaged by a great boar. The patriarch went out and killed the boar; but when the sons went to bring in the carcass, they could find only one tusk which had been broken off in the fray. The old man made a comb out of this, which surprised them all by its power of conveying eternal youth to all who used it. Soon their country became overpopulated, and they set out to seek a new and better land. They traveled together till they came to a river called in Karen "Hti Seh Meh Ywa." Here the old man became impatient at the long time it took the members of the family to cook shellfish and went on ahead, promising to blaze his path that they might follow him through the jungle. After a while the Chinese came along and told them how to open the shells to get out the meat; and then, having eaten, they followed the old man, only to find that the plantain stalks he had cut off had shot up so high that it seemed impossible to overtake him. They, therefore, settled down in the vicinity. The patriarch went on, taking with him the magic comb which has never been discovered to this day.

While this tradition is not confined to the Karen,[1] it has a bearing, I believe, on their origin. A great deal has been written about the "Hti Seh Meh Ywa" or, as Dr. Mason called it, the "River of Running Sand,"[2] which is, as he thinks, the Gobi Desert. This opinion of Dr. Mason is derived from Fa Hien's description of his travels across that desert. However, the Karen name of the river means not only "flowing sand," but also a "river of

[1] This tradition is found among the Lahu and also, according to Thra Ba Tu, among the Chin in the northwest of Burma.

MacMahon, in *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, p. 104, refers to a different version of this story, in which the Chinese go ahead instead of "Htaw Meh Pa," and on p. 104 MacMahon says he found traditions indicating that the Karen formed part of a Chinese expedition into Burma and that they were left behind because of their sluggish movements. These all point to early relations with the Chinese.

[2] Mason, *British Burma*, p. 881.

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173 114 water flowing with sand."[3] The reference to the Gobi Desert seems rather far-fetched and has, therefore, been abandoned by scholars. Dr. D. C. Gilmore suggests the Salween as being a river that fulfils the requirements of the tradition, but bases his conclusions largely on the reference to the early home of "Htaw Meh Pa" as located on Mount "Thaw Thi," the Olympus of the Karen, which is mentioned in Dr. Vinton's version of the story, from which he quotes.[4] This reference is not found in other versions of the story and was probably not a part of it in its earliest form. It seems reasonable, therefore, to look further for the sandy river. Dr. Laufer[5] asserts that the early home of the peoples of eastern Asia was in the upper reaches of the Hoang-ho or Yellow River, of China, and that from this center the Tibetans migrated westward; the early tribes of Indo-China, southward; and the Chinese, southeastward. According to this view, the progenitors of the Karen probably formed a part of the southward migration and, at some stage of their march, stopped on the banks of the Yellow River which, as its name suggests, has from time immemorial been freighted with silt and sand. Here they may have tried to cook the shellfish referred to in the tradition. From this region they doubtless made their way down to what is now Yunnan, where perhaps they found a domicile till they were pushed farther south by migrating people advancing behind them.

101 174 The name "Karen" is an imperfect transliteration of the Burmese word "Kayin," the derivation of which has puzzled students of that language. It has been thought that this word is derived from the name by which the Red Karen call themselves, *i.e.*, "Ka-Ya." The designation of the Sgaw for themselves is "Pgha K'Nyaw," which has not usually been associated with the native name of the Red Karen. In August, 1914, it was suggested to me[6] that these tribal names, which have hitherto been thought to mean simply "men," were related to, and derived from, the name of one of the four ancient tribes of China, that is, the Ch'iang (ancient pronunciation, Giang or Gyang). This tribe, which is indicated in Chinese by the ideograph of a man combined with the character designating a sheep, conveying the meaning of shepherd, occupied

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[3] E. B. Cross, *Journal, American Oriental Soc.* (1854) Vol. IV, pp. 228, ff. and D. C. Gilmore, *Journal, Burma Research Soc.*, Vol. I, p. 191.

[4] J. H. Vinton, D.D. and Rev. T. Than Bya, M. A., *Karen Folklore Stories.*

[5] Dr. B. Laufer, Curator of Anthropology, Field Columbian Museum, Chicago, in a note to the writer, Jan. 6, 1920.

[6] By the Rev. Thra Ba Tu, in a letter dated August 14, 1917.

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101 174 114 the western part of ancient China. The first part of the name, "Ch," means "people," and the latter part, "Yang," is the distinctive tribal name. Turning now to the Karen word "Pgha K'Nyaw." "Pgha" is a general word meaning people. "K'Nyaw" is, according to my informant, composed of two elements: "K'," a prefix often found in the names of tribes in the vicinity of Burma and denoting a tribal group, as "Kachin," "Kethe," or "Karok" (as used by the Talaing of the Chinese). "Nyaw" is derived from "Yang," referred to above. The final nasal "ng" is softened in Karen to the open syllable "aw," following the analogy of many words occurring in the dialects or in Burmese and having nasal endings; and "n" and "ny" are interchangeable. Thus, if this reasoning is correct, "Pgha K'Nyaw" is derived from the ancient "Yang," and is like the source from which the Burmese "Kayin" is derived.[1] This explanation affords another link connecting the Karen with the early dwellers within the confines of the present Chinese Republic.

197 The language of the Karen, after being classed in various ways, has now been recognized as a Sinitic language and, according to the last Burma *Census* (1911) is set down as belonging to the "Siamese-Chinese" sub-family of the Tibeto-Chinese languages, being grouped with the Tai or Shan. I feel sure that this last grouping is subject to revision by the philologists. While at first glance the relationship of these languages appears to be remote, Major H. R. Davies makes a very pertinent statement when he says: "Doubtless owing to phonetic change and the splitting of initial double consonants, many words have been altered beyond all hope of recognition, but a systematic study of the subject would, I believe, reveal many unsuspected resemblances."[2]

When we consider that many of these languages have never been fixed by written characters and that, within the past few decades, the Karen language has so changed that the bard literature of a century ago is almost unintelligible to the present generation, we can see how complicated the problem is and that it is only capable of solution, if at all, at the hands of experts.

193 The Karen language, as we now have it, is a monosyllabic agglutinated speech, with no final consonants in Sgaw Karen and with nasals and finals in other dialects. These are all marks of Sinitic

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[1] Dr. Martin in the *Love of Cathay* gives the names of the other three of the four ancient tribes of China as the Lo in the North, the Yi in the East, and the Man in the South.

[2] Maj. H. R. Davies, Yunnan, *The Link between Burma and the Yangtze*.

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Sin-gan-fu. The small number of Jewish immigrants into China, who were chiefly settled at K'ai-fong in Ho-nan, have never been able to exert the slightest influence on their surroundings, but, on the contrary, have been so completely sinsized that they are now almost extinct. Nestorianism left no trace on the thought of Chinese society. The inscription in question is written in such an exalted and highly literary style that it is quite unintelligible to the people and its technical terminology is a complete mystery to the present scholars of China. No popular influence can be attributed to such a monument." It appears that the number and antiquity of early Jewish immigrants into China have been much overestimated by many writers, so that, if present scholarship is correct, this source from which the Karen could have obtained their tradition has practically been eliminated.[13]

Though there seems to be little ground left for connecting the Karen story of the creation with either the Jewish or Nestorian colonies of China, there are one or two points that might be borne in mind in regard thereto. The story is universally known among the Karen tribes and most fully among the Red Karen, who have been least affected by outside influences in recent times. It contains no reference to the life or teachings of Christ or to any real Messianic hope, but suggests only *Old Testament material*, such as the creation, fall, flood, and tower of Babel, besides containing the Red Karen genealogy. Hence, it would seem that we can hardly attribute the story to the Portuguese missionaries, who were not in Burma until the sixteenth century or later. It would rather point to an earlier Jewish source, from which the story came back in the days when the tribes were less divided than they were later. For if Christian teachers had taught the Karen, would they not have made a deeper impression with their story of salvation than with the less significant one of creation?

Some writers have asserted that the original religion of China was a sort of monotheism, in which one god, the Emperor of Heaven, was somewhat akin to the Jehovah of the Hebrews, though not worshiped to the exclusion of all other deities. There

[13] See also *China and Religion* by H. G. Parker, who says (page 166) that there is no mention of any Western religion in China up to the end of the sixth century, A. D., when Christianity entered the country, except Buddhism which had come in centuries before. On page 185 he gives the date of the arrival of the Jewish colonies in China as 1163, A. D. The article on China in the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* also bears out this testimony.

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period of less than three hundred years. This is doubtless much too low an estimate, unless it refers to the time of their domicile in the particular district now occupied.

In so far as we may venture a conclusion, it is that the Karen migrated into Burma, coming from the ancient home of the early tribes inhabiting the country of China, with whom they are related by tribal, linguistic, and possibly religious ties, the full significance of which are yet to be determined.

NOTE. Various Theories of the Origin and Tribal Relationships of the Karen.—From the middle of the nineteenth century many theories regarding the origin and racial affinity of the Karen have been propounded by writers on Burma. J. R. Logan, writing in 1850 in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* (Vol. IV, p. 478) connects this people with the tribes in the highlands of the Kolan and Irrawaddy and in the lower bend of the Brahmaputra. Writing again in the same *Journal* in 1858 (New Series, Vol. II, p. 387) Logan maintains that the Karen language is a dialect of the Irrawaddo-Brahmaputran dialect, affected by Chinese influence as it came south. Professor De Lacouperie in his introduction to Colquhoun's *Amongst the Shans* (pp. xxxviii, ff.) argues that the Karen are descended from the ancient Tek or Tok tribes of central Asia. Early missionaries and other writers, including Denniker. (*Races of Man*, p. 395) believed that the Kachin and Chin formed a branch of the Karen race. *The Archaeological Survey* of Burma has linked the Karen both with the ancient Kanran, one of the three primitive tribes mentioned in Burmese annals, and with the Miao and Yao of Yunnan (*Report* of 1916). But the Kanran were driven southwestward from the region around Prome and seem to have disappeared from history. (Phayre, *History of Burma*, pp. 5-19.) The linguistic differences between the Miao, Yao, and Karen have led to the abandonment of the idea that they are closely related. In fact, all of these views have been given up, because they were based on an inadequate knowledge of the tribes concerned.

Dr. Mason, in the *Journal, Asiatic Soc. of Bengal* (Vol. XXXVII, p. 162, 1868,) says that the first historical notice of the Karen is in Marco Polo's travels in the 13th Century. He quotes Malte Brun on the basis of Marco Polo's travels, as follows: " 'This country of Caride is the southeastern point of Tibet, and perhaps the country of the nation of the Carianes; which is spread over Ava.' This statement is confirmed by old Bghai poetry in which we find incidentally mentioned the town of Bhamo to which they formerly were in the habit of going to buy axes and bills or cleavers, as they do now at Toungoo. When this poetry was composed they lived five hundred miles north of their present locality." These geographical allusions seem so vague that it appears to be impossible to build much of a theory upon them. Perhaps the lines referring to Bhamo may refer to a trading expedition and not to a line of migration. And the statement of Malte Brun is only conjecture at the most.

In their excellent work on *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, Hose and Mc-

[20] J. O'Riley, *Journal, Indian Archipelago*, Vol. IV, N.S. (1859), p. 8.
[21] *Ibid.*

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Besides being called eternal, God is described as "all powerful" and as "having the knowledge of all things." He created man and "woman from a rib of man," and he made the animals and placed them on the earth.

The power mentioned in the old poems as opposed to "Y'wa" and as having brought evil into the world is "Naw k' plaw." In later poems the name given to him is "Mü kaw li," which is a term of reproach used on account of his often being supposed to assume the female form, in order to accomplish his deceptions on the human race.[1]

He is said to have been a servant of "Y'wa" at first, but to have been cast out of his lord's presence for offering him a gross insult. The other servants of "Y'wa" have ever since cherished the desire to destroy "Mü kaw li," but have never accomplished their purpose. Hence, he continues to roam about, deceiving mankind and spreading death among them, until he shall finally be put out of the way by "Y'wa" himself. He is the direct author of evil and of the curse that has fallen upon the earth which, before his contemptible conduct, had produced rice with kernels as large as pumpkins. It was through his malicious instructions that the people learned to make sacrifices to the "Bgha" and other demons.

The Karen legends and poems give the story of the fall of man in their own picturesque language, which has been translated into English by Dr. D. C. Gilmore, who has brought together the several versions extant in various parts of the country. For the most part I shall paraphrase and condense Dr. Gilmore's translation; for the original narratives, whether in prose or verse, are full of repetitions, variations in insignificant details, and other peculiarities incident to tales that have been handed down by word of mouth.

The Lord "Y'wa," father of the human race, spoke to the first pair he had created: "My son and daughter both, your father will make an orchard for you, and in that orchard there will be seven kinds of trees bearing seven kinds of fruit. Of the seven kinds there

[1] The derivation of the names of this being are interesting. "Naw" is the usual feminine prefix of the names of all females, and "k' plaw" signifies quickly, in reference to the suddenness with which his power to tempt one was exercised. The later name, which has now come into universal use both among non-Christian and Christian Karens as the designation of the Devil, is composed of "mü," meaning woman; "kaw," signifying the state of or pertaining to, and "li," denoting the female locus *impudicus*. This combination constitutes a term of the utmost contempt and refers to the insult which Satan visited upon "Y'wa" when offerings were being brought to him. The Devil's offering was a flower on which he had micturated. His act was discovered and aroused the anger of the entire celestial company.